

'Primitive' artist's work offers glimpse of past

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DUXBURY — To the untrained eye, portraits by late 18th- and early 19th-century Duxbury primitive painter Rufus Hathaway look stiff and monochromatic.

Yet his works are valued enough by art experts to be owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Rhode Island School of Design.

"He has all the limitations of other folk artists — the flatness," said Lanci Valentine, assistant to the director at the Duxbury Art Complex Museum. "But there is a wonderful decorative quality."

"The sitters don't look photographic, the way we think they should look now. But he still captures their personality. They are forthright. They're just right up front."

The Duxbury Art Complex Museum presented an exhibit of 21 of 30 known works by Hathaway this spring in honor of the town's 350th anniversary. One is of Duxbury ship-builder Ezra Weston, known as King Caesar because at the time he was considered one of the wealthiest men in Plymouth County.

Done in warm, dark red-brown, the painting shows a smiling Weston standing framed by a curtained window. Through the window in the distance is a sailing ship and closer is a ship under construction.

His elbow is resting on a ledger and ruler and his right hand holds calipers. Valentine, who presented a lecture on Hathaway and wrote the exhibit's catalog, said artists then commonly included accouterments meaningful to the painting's subject.

Artists at the time either used house paints or ordered powders from London, she said. The paint on some of Hathaway's works is cracked, while on others it is not, possibly indicating varying qualities of paints.

Hathaway was a contemporary of acclaimed artist John Singleton Copley, but the former had no formal training. Born in Freetown, his

father and grandfather were ship carpenters.

"We think he apprenticed with a ship's decorator," Valentine said.

He left home at age 20. His early works were done in the Taunton-Middleboro area around 1791.

"In 1793, he came to Duxbury, which was a prosperous shipping community and a likely place to get commissions," Valentine said. His sister had married a Weston, so he may have had relatives here.

In 1793, he did 10 paintings for prominent citizens in Duxbury. In 1795, he married Judith Winsor, but her father disapproved of Hathaway's occupation as a painter and encouraged him to study medicine with Isaac Winslow of Marshfield.

Hathaway became a doctor, and in 1822 he was elected to the Massachusetts Medical Society and gave up most of his painting. He died that year.

Valentine said Hathaway may be especially interesting for Duxbury residents because he was working during the town's heyday.

"But regardless of whether people are from Duxbury or not, they can get a sense of connectedness from the past. These are real people, despite the fact they are not anatomically perfect," Valentine said.

She said that before the Revolution a person who wanted a portrait painted would go to a city and have it done by a painter who had been to Europe. "But after the Revolution, as more people became prosperous, the itinerant artist began to move out to the countryside," she said.

"They taught themselves," she said. Many were probably sign painters by trade, but sign painters had to be talented because some people didn't read.

"Painting was not seen as the higher calling it is today. It was like having the plumber come to the house to decorate," she said. The word "primitive" attached to a painter means he did not go to art school but probably apprenticed with other painters of his caliber, Valentine said.



Jeff Loughlin photo

Lanci Valentine of the Duxbury Art Complex points out characteristics of primitive painter Rufus Hathaway in his portrait of Ezra Weston, the wealthy Duxbury shipping magnate better known as King Caesar.